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ABSTRACT

Collaborative action research has been a central focus of the Masters in Teaching (MIT) program at Whitworth College, Washington. This paper focuses on two aspects that are essential in any effective teacher education program: collaboration between preservice and inservice teacher education and schools and action research to enhance what K-12 students learn. The paper discusses how the Whitworth MIT has looked at the role that teacher education programs play in collaborative action research efforts between preservice teachers and schools, and it investigates how training in action research methodology for preservice and inservice teachers can be accomplished with the goal of positively impacting student learning. It concludes that 10 years of developing and administering action research in an MIT program have resulted in intensive, intentional, collaborative sessions both in the higher education institution and in K-12 classrooms. The model presented offers a framework for other institutions to consider in establishing mutually beneficial, collaborative partnerships with preservice teacher education and K-12 teachers and schools. The appendixes present a mentor training session overview and action research topics brainstormed at a 1998 Whitworth MIT mentor information meeting. (Contains 26 references.) (SM)

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# Pre- and In-service Practitioner Collaborative Action Research: New Relationships between Graduate Teacher Education Programs and K-12 Schools

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## Introduction

Collaborative action research has been a central focus of the Master in Teaching (MIT) program at Whitworth College. The MIT program was created in 1989 for post-baccalaureate professionals who are changing careers or who chose academic majors at the undergraduate level which did not include teacher education coursework. This cohort-designed teacher certification and master degree program occurs over 15 months of full-time coursework including a year-long school practicum. The vision for the MIT is to develop "reflective teacher-scholars who take personal leadership, are empowered by their teaching vision, and consider themselves members of a learning community" (MIT Handbook, 1998).

The purpose of this paper is to focus attention on the combination of two aspects which we believe should be foundational to any effective teacher education program. The first aspect is that of collaboration between pre-service and in-service teacher education. The second is action research for the ultimate purpose of enhancing what children in K-12 schools learn. Specifically, this paper addresses the following two questions: 1) What role can teacher education programs play in a collaborative action research effort between pre-service teachers and K-12 teachers and schools? 2) How can training in action research methodology of both pre-service and in-service teachers be accomplished with the goal of positively impacting student learning? We address these questions by reporting on the implementation of a training program in action research methodology for both pre-service teachers in the MIT program and their mentor teachers whom they are with for the entire academic year.

## Teacher Education Reform

Over the past several years, national and state teacher education reform efforts have called for collaboration between teacher education programs and the K-12 schools (Goodlad, 1990, 1994; Holmes group, 1990, 1995; Holmes Partnership goals, 1998;

Interstate New Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium 1992; National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education, 1997; National Commission on Teaching and America's Future, 1996). The above cited calls for education reform also advocate that pre-service teacher candidates should be involved in inquiry by studying what they do in the classroom and how that might promote student learning. In the authors' home state of Washington, teacher education programs are expected to prepare teachers to "demonstrate a positive impact on student learning" (WAC, 1993), which includes both collaboration and research with in-service teachers. Collaboration between faculty and students at the pre-service teacher education with educators in K-12 schools appears to be common sense and realistically represents best practice. One of the most conducive avenues this collaboration can take is through action research.

## Collaborative Action Research

Prior to reporting on our efforts, a working definition of the term "collaborative action research" is in order. The *collaboration* portion is action research conducted within the context of collegial support. This collegial support network can include the teacher education candidate, his/her mentor teacher, and the university research advisor and/or supervisor. This collaborative effort can serve as a renewing of teachers' "commitment to thoughtful teaching and also begin developing a community of active professionals" (Sagor, 1992, pp. 10) who are intent on enhancing their students' learning. *Action research* "is concerned with the development, implementation and evaluation of solutions to real, generally immediate, problems and concerns faced by the classroom teacher in his or her daily professional life. The source of the problem to be studied is quite real, the methods are pragmatic and flexible, and the goal is to promote positive change" (Norlander, et.al., 1997). The term *action research* captures the notion of disciplined inquiry (thus, "research") in the context of focused efforts to improve the quality of teaching and ultimately the impact on student learning (thus, "action") (Burnaford, Fischer,

& Hobson, 1996). Calhoun, author of *How to use action research in the self-renewing school* (1994), states, "School is where renewal happens, and the process begins with ourselves. Peter Holly (1991) stated that "action research is participative, both participative in learning and participative in action. It is fostered by a sense of community, is rooted in the real world, and it is attuned to the rhythms of schooling" (pp. 142). It is "built-in" not "bolted on" to the education process (pp. 143).

Collaborative Action Research in the MIT Program

As stated earlier in this paper, teacher candidates in the MIT program have always completed an action research project in their classroom during their year-long student teaching practicum. The focus of these projects have typically come from case study observations, the identification of an area of classroom management concern, or implementation of new curriculum and instructional methods. The emphasis has been on MIT students studying their own practice of teaching, and the resulting impact on student learning. Mentor teachers have provided background information and support for the research projects, but have typically viewed the MIT action research project as a requirement of the program on the graduate student, and not as an avenue of studying their own practice. In other words, there has been a sense of disconnectedness between what the MIT teacher candidates were researching and what mentor teachers practice.

**What role can teacher education programs play in a collaborative action research effort between pre-service teachers and K-12 teachers and schools?**

Because of this disconnectedness, the MIT faculty implemented a mentor training program which focused on how to conduct collaborative action research. Mentors and school site administrators were brought to the campus during Fall (1998) and Spring (1999) terms for formal training sessions in action research, with time set aside for

schools, districts, and grade level groups to collaborate on research interests. In the Fall session, mentors participated in an informational session regarding the purpose and benefits of action research (Appendix A), then brainstormed with peers about topics that they wanted to research in their classrooms. Attached to this paper (Appendix B) is the list of potential research topics generated during the Fall session. The variety of topics stimulated more discussion regarding the vast number of areas that teachers would like to investigate. The content in the Fall training session had several of the same components included in the coursework taken on campus by the MIT students over a three-semester course sequence. The Spring (1999) term session will focus on the mentors' ongoing role in the implementation of the MIT candidates' action research project.

**How can training in action research methodology of both pre-service and in-service teachers be accomplished with the goal of positively impacting student learning?**

Providing deliberate, intensive, collaborative instruction in both action research intent and methodology to pre- and in-service teachers is beginning to establish a knowledge framework for implementation of a study of their common classroom. Continued time for discussion and collaboration among MIT students, mentor teachers, and MIT supervisors trained in action research, provides a scaffolding of support, problem solving, and partnership.

In an effort to assist the MIT candidate with their research projects, their college supervisors serve as research advisors. The supervisors provide feedback to and assist students in determining a topic, designing and conducting the research, and writing a formal research report. College faculty meet individually with each MIT student and his/her mentor early in the school year to assist them with identification of an action research topic. Mentors are encouraged to take ownership of the research being conducted and to view the their partnership with the MIT student as a valuable asset in the pursuit to

enhance their students' learning. Research supervisors, MIT students, and mentor teachers continue to meet throughout the school year to plan and implement the action research project. The MIT students and mentors collaborate in data collection, analysis, and final write-up of the action research project. As one of the program's culminating activities, MIT students present their research at an annual formal research conference on the Whitworth College campus which is attended by School of Education faculty, mentors, and K-12 administrators. This conference provides a local avenue for sharing of results and building of partnerships between higher education and K-12 schools. Finally, there has been an increased emphasis placed on publication of the action research in appropriate journals to add to the current research literature.

## Conclusion

Ten years of experience in developing and administering action research in a MIT program has resulted in intensive, intentional, collaborative sessions both in the higher education institution as well as at the K-12 classroom. This model provides a framework for other institutions to consider in establishing mutually beneficial, collaborative partnerships with pre-service teacher education programs and K-12 teachers and schools. Faculty in teacher education programs must re-vision their importance as both training agents, and supportive collaborators in classroom-based action research Training both current and future teachers to work collaboratively to develop and conduct a reflective, intentional study of their own practice has the potential to positively impact student learning.

Assisting *all* teachers in professional development through collaboration between teacher education faculty, and pre- and in-service practitioners provides a united front in the effort to build a community of lifelong learners. At *all* educational levels, from teacher education programs to K-12 classrooms, collaboration for the purpose of studying teaching and learning is essential.

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## Internet Sites on Action Research

Action Research Collaborative: http://info.csd.org/WWW/resources/arc/arc.html

Action Research at Queens University: http://educ.queensu.ca/~ar/

AERA vision for Action research: http://aera.net/pubs/er/voutfile.html

Center for Action Research in Professional Practice: http://www.bath.ac.uk/carpp/

Collaborative Action Research Network: http://www2.bath.ac.uk/~edsajw/otherpages.html

Educational Action Research Journal: http://www.triangle.co.uk/ear-o.htm

Learning Exchange: http://www.cs.uop.edu/edulink/CAR.html

Networks On-line journal for Teacher Researchers:
http://www.oise.utoronto.ca/~ctd/networks/

Role of Action Research: http://www.keyworld.net/sananton/publications/pub3.html

Southern Cross University Action Research Links:
http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/sawd/ari/ar.htm

Teaching Today for Tomorrow: http://www.mbnet.mb.ca/~sevenoak/ttt/main.htm

# Appendix A: MENTOR TRAINING SESSION OVERVIEW

## MIT Program Goal

The goal of the MIT program is to assist future teachers in developing their teaching visions as they practice becoming reflective teacher-scholars. In light of this goal, MIT candidates, in cooperation with their mentor teachers, strive to study their own practice of teaching, to engage in a process of inquiry which will help them learn more about their work, ask better questions about what works best, and change on the basis of systematic study. The MIT candidate's purposeful study of their teaching practice is consistent with what is currently termed "teacher-as-researcher" or "action research".

## What is Action Research?

The term *action research* captures the notion of disciplined inquiry (thus, "research") in the context of focused efforts to improve the quality of teaching and ultimately the impact on student learning (thus, "action") (Burnaford, Fischer, & Hobson, 1996). Calhoun, author of *How to use action research in the self-renewing school* (1994), states, "School is where renewal happens, and the process begins with ourselves. Our professional role is not to "fix society." We cannot change the home environment of many of our children; nor can we immediately improve the socioeconomic status of the families who depend on us to provide an education for their children. What we can do immediately is to make better choices about how we spend student and adult time and energy in our school." MIT candidates attempt to better understand their teaching by studying the impact of their choices in instruction and curriculum on student understanding.

## Conducting Action Research in the MIT Program

The MIT's study of their practice is not research in the traditional sense of trying to prove a hypothesis. To the contrary, MIT action research studies seldom *prove* anything, and the results may not be generalizable to other classroom situations. The value of action research lies in gathering information in order to answer a problem or question in the classroom. Accordingly, the MIT action research study is naturalistic rather than experimental. There is no attempt to randomize subjects, to have control and experimental groups, or to control all the variables. What the MIT does is to intervene in some way (i.e., they have an idea and collect data to see if the idea makes a difference in their students' learning). Much of the data gathered is qualitative, including student interviews, observations, and examples of student work.

## Determining an Action Research Topic

To determine a topic of study for action research, mentors, MIT candidates, administrators, and other interested classroom participants should examine what is currently occurring in the classroom, and define areas of interest for study. MITs typically investigate incorporating classroom instructional strategies, or utilizing innovative curriculum, always with a clear vision towards improving student learning. Conversations between mentors and MITs, and observations made by MIT candidates in the classroom typically provide the basis for identifying an area of mutual interest and concern for both mentor and MIT. The process of action research is to first identify an area of interest, design a method to collect data, determine the sample of students to study, develop data collection instruments (surveys, observation guides, interview guides, etc.), collect data over an extended period of time in the classroom, analyze the data, interpret and apply the findings, and finally, report the findings to others to increase the collective knowledge base.

## The Role of Mentors in Action Research

Mentors and administrators are a crucial component in the process of the MIT action research project. Mentors can assist the MIT in determining a research topic that is both interesting and useful to the mentor and MIT. The design of the MIT action research study is intentionally planned to not interfere with normal classroom routine as it is carried out during the spring semester (Feb. - May). MIT candidates meet bi-weekly during the fall with a research instructor and periodically with a research advisor to plan their action research study. During the study, the mentor can assist MIT students in gathering classroom data, when appropriate, such as making student observations while the MIT candidate is teaching. The final report of the action research project is presented at the Annual MIT Research and Development Conference, held during July at Whitworth. Mentors and administrators are invited to attend this conference to hear the results of action research studies conducted within their classrooms and districts. The sharing of results of a purposeful study of one's teaching practice provides a forum for continued school improvement.

## MIT Action Research Project Timeline

| Month | MIT Responsibilities | Mentor Recommendations |
|---|---|---|
| September | Observation in the classroom, initial identification of an action research area of interest | Discuss potential research areas with MIT |
| October | Determine action research topic, begin review of related research, meet with MIT research advisor | Assist with determination of action research topic, meet with MIT and research advisor |
| November | Design study to complete during student teaching, meet with MIT research advisor and mentor | Discuss with MIT and research advisor potential data gathering instruments, research design, and related literature implications |
| December | Complete action research proposal, share research design with mentor | Discuss final plans for action research study with MIT |
| February - May 15 | Begin student teaching, follow research proposal, gather data, meet periodically with research advisor | Support MIT during student teaching, assist where agreed upon in data collection such as observation, visit with research advisor |
| May 15 - June | Analyze collected data | |
| June - July | Complete writing of action research study, share findings with mentor, present findings at MIT Research and Development Conference | Discuss research findings with MIT, attend if possible the MIT Research and Development Conference |

## Appendix B: Whitworth MIT Mentor Information Meeting 9/25/98 Brainstormed Action Research Topics

- Attitudes about reading
- Best practices for infusion of technology into curriculum
- Reading skills
- Effective spelling instruction
- Classroom meeting process – effectiveness in teaching democracy/problem solving
- Writing instruction: 6 traits, writing forms, writing process: integrating use of these
- Arts education
- Learning styles
- Parent communication via class newsletter
- Parent involvement practices
- Evaluation and assessment of students
- Teaching strategies to meet state assessment test (WSAL)
- Effective classroom management: techniques, class size, days of the week, class make-up, schedule changes, morning vs. afternoon classes
- Teaching a class with students at different learning/ability levels: reading comprehension, vocabulary levels below or above grade level
- What characteristics of a class or school make students value education?
- What allows students with "challenging circumstances" to be successful in school?
- Are AP classes most valuable to "gifted" students?
- Does a community service component within a class or school change student attitudes about volunteering/community service?
- Kids that "shut down" for various reasons, such as frustration
- Kids that act out due to frustration, control, power
- Ability grouping
- Quality interaction
- Cross-Age tutoring, High school and elementary
- Joint writing and editing project that results in publication
- Character Education Program (STAND): evaluate impact on playground climate, classroom, & building
- Importance of setting goals and its effects on children: written and planned
- Impact of music on class subjects such as math and art
- Impact of de-emphasis of math facts in new math programs
- Project Learning: real life based vs. book based
- How does attitude effect student achievement in reading?
- What are my students learning about music that is different from before? How can I assess the changes?
- How to achieve balance between a performance oriented program and music ed. (listening appreciation/theory/composition)

- Is the "Reading Mastery" program an effective tool for students with learning difficulties?
- Will training cross-age tutors in guided reading strategies improve reading achievement in their younger partners? Improve the tutors' reading?
- Peer-editing: Is it valuable/working?
- Ideas and content – How important to writing?
- Does writing improve "just because"? (maturation?)
- Student Directed Learning: Is it a more viable way to learn?
- What do you do with student who's not motivated?
- Block vs. traditional period
- Computer use and writing
- Authentic assessment: What does it look like?
- Would students who are asked to participate in community involvement find the experience valuable in retrospect?
- What affect/effect does inclusion of special ed. (MR) students have on other students' learning in the classroom?
- Is special ed. effective as we are using it?
- Does technology have a positive impact on student learning?
- Does immersion in a particular writing form improve the quality of students' writing?
- Does GESA skills improve student management and achievement in the classroom?
- Does departmentalizing in the elementary school improve student learning?
- Does involvement in sports adversely affect student academic performance?
- Does the stress of preparation for mandated federal and state testing adversely affect the climate of the classroom?
- Will student/teacher journaling affect the quality of student writing? (content and organization, conventions, etc.)
- Does being part of a specific team make a difference in motivating students to come to school regularly?
- What are attendance motivators for at-risk students?
- What are interventions that are successful for ADD, ADHD, and 504 students? (social or academic)
- How does middle school looping affect students?
- Gardner's 7 intelligences, effect on incorporating more music
- Giving students the opportunity to choose a project that uses a specific intelligence
- What is the best assessment tool(s) to promote student learning and growth?